

Skin Shed

**CAROLINE
SMITH**

24 **BRAND**

I.

Bolts loosen from their cradle, all heads bowed low as you walk towards me. You're smiling but I don't believe it. Your footsteps are silent but still trace marks that you will make on me. You place the smallest of your fingers inside my mouth and push further and further; but my body is compact, immovable, reckless.

You laugh. Lean in to my ear and touch my lobe with your tongue. You whisper something but I can't hear what you say. My mind has plunged deep, rocking in my belly, curling memories around my legs. You pull them tighter. Green chords that wrap me up in lullabies where white light cracks open midnight.

You strike me. My cheek burns. I want to place warm comfort on it.

OPEN YOUR LEGS

I won't. You know that. The pain jolts my mind sky-bound. There's a new space for my stomach and a hum, dizzy in my thighs. I grasp seconds on time and dangle listless and light.

OPEN YOUR FUCKING LEGS

I won't do what you ask of me. I stare, full-eyed, drinking you. You can't have me yet, not while the heads are lowered.

You force your hand between my legs but I squeeze them shut and the humming gets loud.

You walk away; eyes follow you. I open my legs. See? I've opened my legs.

Too late, you're gone. The door clicks and the bolts push back heavy, dead.

II.

I open the door and see your face in the strip light. Teeth bared, skin contorted, swept into a smile. You say goodbye well. I'd like to dance on your body so that you laugh and cry and feel, robbed as you are of daylight, you steal only the oily glow of the overheads. Press fast forward, but you're not there. You were never there, only once when you caught a page of tarantulas. Thick, black webs that you made, pausing and stopping. And in that breath when you saw what you were capable of, there. A tiny murmur, a flicker that we once caught on stage.

He smiled at you; I looked at you. Daubed lipstick, German strides, the lick of the alsatian's tongue catching him barelegged. That was your dream. And then, in the cold stone of north London, us clutching our wine outside wrapped up in scarves, the promise was gone. The serpent was backstage – and we, framed by a crowd who were wagging and shifting and surging into the night were gone. Lost.

I open the door and look at you. But it's not the same. We caught the dance but it was only a promise. The serpent's coiled below and the dogs returned to the circus. But you and I are waiting, somewhere in the shadows where half-truths taunt, burn too bright and then vanish, hidden, buried in the tarantula's lair.

III.

They are in there – that low tin shelter, the one with the rust, the colour of age at odds with the landscapes, ever on the move, shifting and changing with the passing of time. You know they are in there, don't you. Packed tight, free to roam on the stone floor, they are not caged. Still, you don't ask questions. Not on your holiday. They should make noise, but they have fallen silent over the last few days. The regularity of him coming in, click clacking on the floor with those worn boots of his, arms full of stool and pump and tubes. He turns on the strip light. You don't see him enter but they sense him. They smell him. By now, they've forgotten what you enjoy late afternoon, every afternoon, of your stay. Sweet, hazy air. Punch-drunk azaleas lolling over hedges.

No, they are in there, safe as houses, locked down. Looked after in the dark. Force fed. Fattened. They wait for him with his stool and his rubber paraphernalia – God, in this age, where's the

machinery; isn't there a more efficient way of doing this, what he does, every afternoon? You don't know about that. You've seen him around town. He's the tallest man apparently. Not in the town, or the country but in the whole world. Nearly eight foot tall, married a girl half his age, half his size. Sweet girl. Sliding a bolt on the bedroom door – tiny space, her; her reduced to It.

Enough is enough.

The barn doors open and they shudder, close up gaps between them, moving like a sharp breath inwards. They squeeze together, necks bobbing, wings clamped shut. They manage space. They stare. But today it's not him. It's her. They can tell because of the rectangle sized gap of daylight where his body should be. They see sky, light rushes in and darts in their eyes as direct as needles. She opens the door wide and this time they can see the fields where they used to graze, the shingle path, the pond, before this, in here. She is walking away, beckoning them outside and they start following her, no stool, no huge hands, no scalding tube, no feeding from the feeder.

And that's where you come in, lying on your back, casting an eye upwards, you see the birds fly over, maybe fifty geese. You think this is nice. A real treat, a real countryside touch to your stay. You wander down to the farm soon after and you see her as she gets into a taxi with a suitcase but she doesn't see you. Funny girl, you think. Later that evening, you will marvel at those same birds gathered silently outside the barn. They came back. They found their way home.